

THE MATSON FAMILY

TURNING TRAGEDY INTO TRIUMPH.

Arlene Matson stood quietly on that cool summer morning, looking at the gravesites tucked along side the road at the west edge of the cemetery. Her heart was heavy as she recalled that horrible day, January 16, 1988. Her only son, SGT Ronald Matson, 28, had perished in a gas explosion and fire in his Fort Eustis Army Base apartment in Virginia. Also succumbing to the blaze were his 6-week-old son, James Earl Matson, his 22-month-old daughter, Pamela Matson, his 10-year-old stepdaughter, Christina Johnson Matson, and Amanda Nutting, Christina's 9-year-old cousin.

"What do you suppose happened to this family?" Arlene overheard visitors at the cemetery questioning, as they stood looking at the graves all marked with the same day of death. "Oh, somebody was probably drunk, and they were all killed in a car crash," was the flippant reply. She wanted to step closer and explain that it was her family, but she quickly moved away, tears welling in her eyes. "How will I ever deal with this hurt," she thought.

Arlene remembers receiving the horrible news at 1:00 a.m., when the Army Chaplain called. She recalled not wanting to take another breath and how she just wanted to die to avoid the pain. Many sleepless nights followed. Arrangements had to be made for the military to transport the four caskets to Portland International Airport and then to Camas for the burials. While Army rules did not allow more than one person per casket, because her son was holding baby James when they died, an exception was made.

Consumed with grief, she often visited the cemetery twice a day. "It became my life," she said. She would take a book and spend the afternoon sitting on a bench, where she found peace and solace. The deer and eagles that frequented the cemetery in the early morning hours helped ease her broken heart. Arlene's visits helped her to stay connected with the only family she had. Although her husband was also filled with grief, he chose not to return to the cemetery, but supported Arlene in her quest.

Returning to her work in the florist's shop after the death of her family members was especially difficult, as she was required to make floral arrangements for funerals. Refusing pills prescribed by the doctor to ease her pain, Arlene chose to deal with her grief in a different way. She devoted her time and energy to improving the cemetery. She saw a need for a flagpole, so she donated one and had it installed. She also bought trees, shrubs and stone benches to honor her husband, parents, grandparents and family members who are all buried in the Camas Cemetery. Many people have benefited from her generosity.

Although healing was a long and painful process, the cemetery became a familiar and comfortable place for her. She knew first-hand the difficulties bereaved families often experienced. Her down to earth, positive and practical approach in dealing with people showed that she truly cared about others dealing with similar sadness. She became a 19-year member of the Cemetery Board, serving both as Vice-President and President. She is one who unquestionably turned tragedy into triumph, and has many entertaining stories to tell of her experiences in and around the cemetery. She is a true star of this tour.